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REVIEW ESSAY

In the High Cotton

by

Stephen J. Whitfield

Bauman, Mark K. and Berkley Kalin, eds. *The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, 1880s to 1990s*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997.

Bauman, Mark K. *The Southerner as American: Jewish Style*. Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1996.

Greene, Melissa Fay. *The Temple Bombing*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996.

Mamet, David. *The Old Religion*. New York: Free Press, 1997.

Suberman, Stella. *The Jew Store: A Family Memoir*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 1998.

Uhry, Alfred. *The Last Night of Ballyhoo*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1997.

The historical study of southern Jewry may have entered its high phase. To be sure the number of first-rate monographs has not yet reached a critical mass; nor is the number of academics and other professionals whose work is devoted to the southern Jewish past as big, say, as any department of history on the main campus of any state university. No work of synthesis has yet topped the insight, charm, and evocative power of *The Provincials* (1973). It was published so far back in the Pleistocene Age that, for the twenty-fifth anniversary edition, Eli N. Evans revised it for the end of the last millennium.¹ Nevertheless the signs of heightened interest in this subject are unmistakable; southern Jews are no longer treated primarily as exotica, as objects of astonishment. The questions that the Mississippian Quentin

Compson is asked by his Harvard roommate remain relevant: "What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all."² The answers admittedly differ from Faulkner's, and they are now coming with a momentum that is by no means spent.

The vital signs include major exhibitions and museums, especially the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience (which was dedicated in 1989) and an associated unit, the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. In 1998, when the museum sponsored an exhibit, "Alsace to America: Discovering a Southern Jewish Heritage" in Jackson, Mississippi, the show was newsworthy enough for *U.S. News and World Report* to devote three pages to it. A piece ran in the *New York Times* as well. In 1994 the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum was established in Atlanta—where the two most shocking events in the internal history of southern Jewry occurred. Both entailed antisemitic violence. The conviction and lynching of Leo Frank in 1913–1915 is the subject of David Mamet's novel, and the bombing of the Hebrew Benevolent Congregation on Peachtree Street in 1958 is recounted in Melissa Fay Greene's monograph. A third work among the six under review, Alfred Uhry's play, is also set in the metropolis that called itself, as the tempo of civil rights agitation accelerated, "the city too busy to hate." To the updated edition of *The Provincials*, Evans added a chapter on communal growth in the region over the last three decades. But he focused on Atlanta, which in that span of time more than quadrupled its Jewish population. From six synagogues in the late 1960s, the number spurted to twenty-four at the end of the 1990s. Atlanta is poised, Evans predicted, "to become . . . one of the major centers of Jewish life in America."³

In 1997 Richmond mounted an exhibition on "Commonwealth and Community: The Jewish Experience in Virginia." Writing in conjunction with the exhibition, historian Melvin I. Urofsky underscored how integral Jews have been to the Old Dominion, "sharing the ups and downs of Virginia for nearly four centuries. . . . They have done so not as a despised minority cravenly seeking tolerance but as proud citizens of the state." In another characteristic note in the historiography of southern Jew-

ry, Urofsky added: "Aside from their religious beliefs, there is little to distinguish Virginia Jews from their Christian neighbors."⁴

Miami, however, is quite different. So many northern and midwestern urban Jews arrived there as tourists (now, commonly, as residents) that Hispanic hotel employees reportedly nicknamed their place of work "Casa Hadassah." In Miami the director of the new Sanford L. Ziff Jewish Museum of Florida, Marcia Zerivitz, has asserted, "If you have Jewish memories, you'll always be Jewish, so what we're doing is creating, renewing or bringing to the front the Jewish memories that will give Floridians a basis on which to pass on their heritage."⁵ She was undoubtedly speaking for many others—lay and professional—who find buried treasure in the past of southern Jewry and discern in its legacy a way of guaranteeing its future.

Much more evidence can be adduced. The Southern Jewish Historical Society has been revived, and its annual journal has become a forum for the work of younger researchers in particular. The Public Broadcasting System recently presented Mike DeWitt's 1998 documentary on Mississippi's *Delta Jews*. An academic press (the University of Tennessee's) has announced a series devoted to southern Jewry. Courses have been offered on the topic at Hebrew Union College (by Gary P. Zola, the biographer of Charleston's Isaac Harby) and at the College of Charleston (by Dale Rosengarten and Jack Bass). An alumnus of that college, Ludwig Lewisohn, became the subject in 1998 of an enormously meticulous, fascinating two-volume biography by Ralph Melnick. That an academic publisher (Wayne State University Press) would commit itself to so massive a study testifies to more than mere respect for Melnick's energies as a researcher and his insight into Lewisohn's psyche. There is something representative about Lewisohn as well. He happens to be the only southern white portrayed in one influential analysis of what was once called "race," in Werner Sollors' *Beyond Ethnicity* (1986). Lewisohn realized on graduating from the College of Charleston that "my name and physiognomy were characteristically Jewish." Yet descent could not easily be reconciled with consent: "I could take no refuge in the spirit and traditions of my own people. I knew little of them.

My psychological life was Aryan through and through."⁶ Later, outside South Carolina, in the Northeast and in Europe, he would retrace the labyrinth of his own past and construct an affirmative Jewish identity. Whether such haunted Jews might have balanced their twin heritages more evenly while remaining in the region is among the intriguing mysteries that historians of southern Jewry are challenged to solve.

Those who want the Jewish variant on the regional history to be better known and understood have reason to be exultant or, as southerners themselves would phrase it, to feel in the high cotton. For the above list can easily be augmented by memoirs and by congregational and communal histories, which continue to appear and put a twist on the injunction of Quentin Compson's roommate—"tell about the South"—by showing how its Jews fit in. The half-dozen works under review suggest this heightened interest. This tiny sample is no more intended to imply that they represent the only worthy efforts, however, than this review essay should in any way be taken as comprehensive.

All of these books share a sense that Jews believed that they had adapted more or less successfully to a peculiar region. All of these works testify to the faith of Evans's "provincials" that integration had occurred, that Judeophobia was usually no worse than annoying. Such Jews had little sense of the estrangement that so often has been ascribed to the Diaspora. Indeed it is the virtual totality of that acculturation that must impress the historian. "One cannot say there is a distinctive Jewish community in New Orleans," one of its Reform rabbis observed in 1941. "There is rather a distinct New Orleans culture of which the Jewish community is a part." The city's most famous playwright was Lillian Hellman. She was also the most honored Jewish playwright to emerge from the region prior to Alfred Uhry and Tony Kushner, and in 1952 she assured the House Committee on Un-American Activities: "I was raised in an old-fashioned American tradition," which included the values of honesty, neighborliness, civic allegiance. "I respected these ideals of Christian honor."⁷ (They weren't antithetical to Judaism either, of which she seemed unaware or indifferent.)

In seeking acceptance, southern Jews were quick to realize that they should not push their luck. They should not generate friction, because resentment and hate might be just below the surface. In 1931 Faulkner's Clarence Snopes was presumably not speaking only for himself when he proclaimed, "The lowest, cheapest thing on earth aint a nigger: it's a jew. We need laws against them. Drastic laws."⁸ Oppression was fully codified and implemented against the second lowest and cheapest thing on earth; Jim Crow was fully embedded in the legislative and juridical structure of the region. But antisemitic laws could gain no traction and could not be effectuated; there was simply no way for the power structure to single out Jews as targets of persecution. Nevertheless the young publisher of the *Chattanooga Times*, Adolph Ochs, advised his co-religionists in the city to keep a low profile: "Don't be too smart. Don't know too much."⁹

The Classical Reform that seemed almost indigenous to the region gave American Judaism a southern accent. When Ochs's beloved nephew Julius Adler died, the daughter of the deceased was mystified to discover that the funeral rites at their Reform temple did not allow for a rendition of Adler's favorite song, which was "Onward, Christian Soldiers." While Malcolm Stern served as a rabbi in Norfolk, from 1947 to 1964, "the groom never broke a glass at a wedding because Classical Reform disapproved." A predecessor, Rabbi Simon R. Cohen, even wore an Episcopal collar. What made Stern eligible to serve Congregation Ohel Sholom? It wanted "a rabbi who is not a Zionist."¹⁰

Further evidence of the limitations of southern Judaism can be extracted from the honors thesis of a Princeton senior, whose cousin is the wife of the author of this essay. By interviewing elderly relatives who lived virtually their entire lives in Richmond, Virginia, Savannah, Georgia, and Jacksonville, Florida, Catherine A. Wilkinson recorded the anxiety of acculturation, especially as a few rituals were reasserted after the 1960s. (Wilkinson disguised her relatives by giving them pseudonyms.) "When we were in public places," Georgia Rosen recalled, "conversation was consciously directed away from anything that would let the people around us know that we were Jewish." By blurring the difference

between Protestant and Jewish worship, Classical Reform promised safety (though her conversational concern hardly signifies self-assurance). While serving as president of Congregation Ahavath Chesed in Jacksonville, Rosen's father, the eighty-four-year-old Joshua Vlach, allowed no candles to be lit in their home for Hanukkah or the Sabbath. Neither was a seder conducted, nor any other Jewish holiday ever celebrated in their home.¹¹

The arrival of Jews from eastern Europe, who established a Conservative synagogue (The Center) in Jacksonville, was disconcerting. Seventy-four-year-old Mark Jacobs remembers feeling "embarrassed to bring any of my Christian friends over there and say that this was my religion." Another old-timer from Congregation Ahavath Chesed, Caroline Safer, recalled, "My parents would rather me have dated a gentile than someone from The Center." Its "Jewishness . . . was foreign to me. I felt more comfortable among Christians." Savannah's Betsy Klein could summon similar memories: "I think in my family, it would have been far better to marry an outstanding Christian . . . The worst thing I could have married was a Russian Jew. That would have been the end—that wasn't even in the discussion." Her husband "can't stand to see the rabbi with a tallis. He can't stand to see the rabbi with a yarmulke. . . . I don't think he would care if they did it in their bedrooms, but he doesn't want his rabbi walking down the street with a yarmulke and a beard. He doesn't want him to represent him that way in this community."¹² The rabbi was expected to be an emissary whose personality and character would accelerate the exit from the ghetto.

But in the past three decades, this version of Reform has withered, and rituals that had been discarded were reintroduced by Jews who cared less for a faith palatable to gentiles. Or perhaps earlier generations had underestimated the regional capacity for tolerance and change. When a newer sort of Reform Jew was elected president of Congregation Ahavath Chesed, Leonard Glantz, age seventy-four, "was outraged . . . [He] wore one of those skullcaps on the pulpit . . . inflicting his opinion on the rest of us. I never went to Temple during the two years that he was president. I recognize that he had the right to wear it as a regular

member, but I felt that his wearing it in his official capacity as president was an affront to the 95–98 percent of those of us in the audience who were bare-headed.” Glantz refused to “go to Temple any more. If I wanted [to join] a Conservative or an Orthodox temple [*sic*], I would go there.” He was “an unreconstructed rebel and proud of it. I am more proud of being a Southerner than of being just an American.”¹³

These Jews resisted the notion of peoplehood. They spurned what their fellow Germans—with their flair for combining nouns—called an *Abstammungsgemeinschaft* (a community of common descent). Down-playing their ethnicity, most southern Jews fancied themselves as a religious minority stripped of other attributes that might distinguish them from their neighbors. Instead of membership in an intact historical minority within Christendom, pride of place in their southern pedigree was stressed. The thrust of southern Jewish history has not been the cultivation of dissidence or the effort to legitimize pluralism. Southern Jews have typically believed in the compatibility of the two traditions that they could inherit and invoke. But that reconciliation has usually been achieved by minimizing or abandoning a Jewish heritage, by hoping to validate the architectural dictum that “less is more.”

The extent of assimilation is personified in Alfred Uhry, the only playwright ever to win the writer’s triple crown—a Pulitzer Prize in 1988 for *Driving Miss Daisy*, an Oscar for adapting that play to the screen two years later, and a Tony for his second non-musical play, *The Last Night of Ballyhoo*. In 1867 his family had helped found Atlanta’s Temple, as the Hebrew Benevolent Congregation was later commonly known. His mother’s uncle owned the National Pencil Company, where Leo Frank served as superintendent.¹⁴ Confirmed at the Temple, Uhry had not become bar mitzvah. Nor did he ever attend such a *simcha*, which would have befuddled him, his family, and his peers about as completely as the formalities of a Balinese cockfight. Until he went to study at Brown University, he had attended only one seder. What animated the German-American Jews of his class, he believed, was the fantasy of turning Episcopalian, and he would get very close, by

marrying one. Their four children, Uhry told an interviewer, “all [became] goyim, I’m afraid. I just didn’t give them a spiritual identity. I had none to give. I was deprived; so are they.”¹⁵ Such was the terminus of an historical process and of an ideological impetus. What started in central Europe as *yiddishkeit* was reduced to a religion that was itself limited mostly to ethical precepts, but instead of becoming stronger, Judaism became weaker. The sole marker of identity was neither cultivated nor explored. Bereft of emotional or historic authority, Judaism was instead left helpless against the larger pressures of assimilation. Nonetheless, others of Uhry’s generation remained active in the Temple and the Jewish federation and did not push the envelope of full integration.

His play, set in December 1939, is a poignant depiction of Atlanta Jewry’s upper crust as it prepares for the two-day social event that occurs annually at Christmastime. These dances, barbecues, debutante celebrations, and, finally, the cotillion bring acceptable young men and women together from throughout the region. Excluded from the upper reaches of gentile society, these Jews have to settle for partying and pairing off among their own (which include a scion of so prominent a family as “the Louisiana Weils”). Snobbery means excluding more observant Jews of eastern European stock, keeping them out of the Standard Club, treating them as the Other. Among them is Joe Farkas, who has moved down from New York City and who notices in the living room of the bustling, Ballyhoo-driven Freitags a Christmas tree that is bare at the top. Boo Levy, the sister of his employer, Adolph Freitag, explains the decorative omission: “Jewish Christmas trees don’t have stars.” In this family Passover is not only ignored, the holiday is also very dimly known, which compels Farkas to inquire: “Are you people really Jewish?” (pp. 6, 49). They are, of course. But that accident of birth is a source of shame, a frustration in their efforts at social climbing; and Boo cannot refrain from calling the personable but very ethnic Farkas a “kike” (p. 26).

The Last Night of Ballyhoo effectively recaptures a certain epoch, when *tout* Atlanta was thrilled to host the premiere of *Gone With the Wind*, and when even Jews wanted to forget about what

Adolph Freitag calls "this Hitler business in Poland" (p. 34). But the play is not entirely satisfactory, because it prefers to make the Freitags into objects of satire rather than endow them with full credibility. Veering a bit uncertainly between realism and mockery, Uhry's drama withholds too much sympathy to allow all of its major characters to be intelligible, inevitably limited by their time and place. The final scene violates what has come before, a dream of *teshuvah* that collides with how the self-satisfied Freitags have defined themselves. The Christmas tree has disappeared; the family has gathered at the dinner table. Sunny Freitag, the Wellesley-educated daughter, is central to this fantasy, as she recites the Hebrew blessing over the Sabbath candles, and all join in saying, "Shabbat Shalom" (p. 99).

Were they deluded in their feeling of security in the South? Were they right to assume that their neighbors would be tolerant so long as religious differences were very minor, and so long as no other assertions of Jewish identity would be advanced? The point of Mamet's novel is to discount such belief, to explore the penalties of denial. The jailed Leo Frank realizes that bigots "would always [make him] be a Jew. And that all his ratiocination regarding assimilation was, to them, pathetic" (pp. 148-149). What had begun in the Old World as emancipation was to end with a rope and a knife. Mamet's most famous plays have portrayed businessmen, and other works have mourned the loss of authentic Jewish identity. Here he tries to combine them by locating a problem in the past. But his themes are undermined by his method. Presenting itself as an historical novel, *The Old Religion* opens with a prefatory note: "In 1915 a young factory girl was killed . . ." (p. xi). In fact Mary Phagan had been murdered two years earlier. Soon Frank is admiring a glass crafted in what the text calls Czechoslovakia (a nation that did not exist until after World War I). He is asked about the Ku Klux Klan, which was revived only after the protagonist of this novel was lynched (p. 5). Such anachronisms, though minor, do not inspire confidence that the author has thought himself back into the period. He evokes little sense of time or

place, preferring to get inside what might have been Frank's subjective life.

This is a literary mistake. Mamet is acclaimed of course for his dialogue, his uncanny manipulation of the vernacular, especially when unleashed as coarse, furious invective by competitive, swaggering men. (This reviewer once attended the author's public reading of *The Old Religion*; and a member of the audience, refusing to credit the creative resources that Mamet could summon from his own imagination, asked where he might have heard what he then put in the mouths of his characters. Was it in cafés, and which cafés? "If that *were* the way I write," Mamet told the nudnick, "do you think I would tell *you*?") But in this novel, the flair for dialogue is untapped; the introspective voice given to Leo Frank does not ring true. His thoughts and fears lack verisimilitude.

The historical element of this novel is largely absent, but the consequences of mob rule can be noted here. The virulent anti-semitism that the Frank case exposed seemed to highlight the precariousness of the Jewish condition. The need became all the more urgent: to strip Judaism of its distinctiveness (and therefore of its integrity) for the sake of peace, to fit seamlessly into a racist region without challenging injustice, and to define the rabbinical vocation not in terms of scholarship but rather of diplomacy. That an innocent Jew could be lynched thus led to redoubled efforts to be absorbed into the southern way of life. Frank had been a member of the Temple as well as the elite Standard Club and president of the B'nai B'rith lodge. Yet not even he was safe. His vulnerability to antisemitic violence traumatized Atlanta Jewry in particular.

The remedy was silence. Among the close friends of his widow was the family of Janice Oettinger, who learned about the case only when she was a freshman at the University of Georgia. Only when her mother was obliged to inform her that "Miss Lucille" was Lucille Frank did the future wife of Rabbi Jacob Rothschild make the link that no one wanted to remember or mention. In 1958 she and her husband would experience a dreadful scare of their own, when the bombing of the Temple he served seemed a harbinger of the horror that their community would have to relive

all over again. Janice Rothschild Blumberg recalled that story in a splendid, touching memoir, *One Voice* (1985).¹⁶ That account is now amplified and enlarged in *The Temple Bombing*, which closely examines the perpetrators of the old ultra-violence, such as the Confederate Underground and the National States' Rights Party. Drawing extensively on interviews as well as court records, Greene has produced a riveting work that is unlikely to be superseded. Five creepy racists were charged with the crime. Prosecuted twice, they got a mistrial and then an acquittal. (Their attorney worked the night shift as Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan.) *The Temple Bombing* constitutes a rebuke to civics textbooks: the jurors who granted the defendants their freedom would hardly elicit trust in the judgment of ordinary citizens.

To trace historic continuity with the Frank case would be an error. The factory superintendent was innocent, a hapless victim of a terrible miscarriage of justice. From the pulpit and beyond, Rabbi Rothschild was conscientious, articulate, and brave in his denunciation of racial injustice. He knew the risks he was taking in battling segregation. Nevertheless the power structure of the city rallied behind him and the Temple. Mayor William Hartsfield, who had coined the phrase "the city too busy to hate," rushed to the scene of the crime, lent his full public support, and offered reward money. Rewards were also posted by the First National Bank of Atlanta, by the governor of the state, and by the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*. In expressing its editorial outrage as well, the newspaper blamed such violence on a larger climate of lawlessness that segregationist officials were stoking. For such editorials Ralph McGill would earn a Pulitzer Prize. Even President Eisenhower, in a curious statement, condemned the bombers for traducing "the good name of the Confederacy" (p. 246). By a unanimous vote the Atlanta Board of Education offered school facilities to the Temple. In planting fifty sticks of dynamite under this house of worship, the conspirators acted without any civic sanction whatsoever. They were isolated, beyond the pale of respectability. The vicious Judeophobia that surrounded the trial of Leo Frank had evaporated.

But neither the shock nor the ramifications should be underestimated. Learning of the bombing of the Temple, "Miss Daisy" tells her chauffeur how baffling the choice of target is: "I'm sure they meant to bomb one of the conservative synagogues or the orthodox one. The Temple is reform." Those whose roots had sunk deepest in southern soil often betrayed the greatest insecurity. In the immediate wake of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, Rabbi Rothschild realized that "scions of old, established families well settled in the South for generations . . . ran for cover first," according to his widow. "It was they who claimed to be completely accepted by the gentiles in their communities and they who insisted that for them Judaism was a religion only."¹⁷ Having been summoned to Atlanta only in 1946, Rothschild had less of an emotional investment in the compatibility of Judaism with the southern way of life. In the year of the explosion at the Temple, he replied to a southern rabbi who had urged prudence, "How can we condemn the millions who stood by under Hitler or honor those few who chose to live by their ideals . . . when we refuse to make a similar choice now that the dilemma is our own?" (p. 189) He added, "When you—and many others in the South—seek to silence those who would speak out, then you really do more than just remove yourselves from the battle. You also seek to deny the right of those who want to act with courage to do so."¹⁸

The official support that the Temple enjoyed can be compared with the response a decade later in Mississippi. When Rabbi Perry E. Nussbaum received the news of the bombing in Atlanta, he wrote his colleague: "What can one write to you from Jackson, Mississippi?" In the attack on Rothschild's Temple, Nussbaum had a premonition of the fate of Beth Israel: "I doubt if my own Congregation will escape" (p. 262). He was right. Nine years later both the temple in Jackson as well as Nussbaum's home would be bombed. Mississippi's Governor Paul Johnson was indignant: "It is almost unthinkable that this kind of cowardly assault on a house of worship could be carried out in this civilized state among our civilized people." He had never bothered to decry the destruction of black churches. In the *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, one angry columnist offered no principled opposition to violence in his

warning to the night riders: "You've bombed churches before, but never one where white people worship. This is Mississippi and we've had enough."¹⁹ By 1967, a barrier had been crossed, and tolerance for the dynamiting of houses of worship clearly had its limits. White Christian ministers suddenly found their voices in condemning the desecration of a building in which to pray, as they had not done when those abruptly bereft of such an edifice were black. The white skins of Jews still conferred advantages.

Rothschild and Nussbaum were perhaps the most prominent southern rabbis to champion civil rights. Greene herself mentions nine others: Julian Feibelman in New Orleans; Emmet Frank in Alexandria, Virginia; Alfred Goodman in Columbus, Georgia; Charles Mantinband in Hattiesburg, Mississippi; William Silverman in Nashville; Malcolm Stern in Norfolk; Allan Tarshish in Charleston; James Wax in Memphis; and Louis Youngerman in Savannah (p. 178). Her list warrants comparison with the rabbis profiled in *The Quiet Voices*, which has chapters on Rothschild (by his widow), Nussbaum, Mantinband, and Wax; and Stern provides a memoir. The anthology, which Bauman and Kalin have very skillfully edited, portrays an earlier generation that confronted Jim Crow: Max Heller of New Orleans, Morris Newfield of Birmingham, and William Fineschriber of Memphis. Also included are Milton Grafman of Birmingham and two Texans: Sidney Wolf and David Jacobson. Myron Berman's memoir of Richmond completes the list of individuals, although there are also chapters on the clash between northern and southern Jews over the tempo of desegregation (by Marc Dollinger), on Arkansas Jewry (by Carolyn Gray LeMaster) and on Jewry in Durham and environs (by Leonard Rogoff). Bauman provides a valuable introduction, and a father-son team (Howard Greenstein of Jacksonville and Micah Greenstein of Memphis) appeal at the end of the volume for a continued commitment to the prophetic vein in Judaism. This volume of essays merits praise for its richness of texture, its coherence of outlook, its blend of biography and social history, and its contribution to knowledge of Reform Judaism in the region. Indeed *The Quiet Voices* is probably the most important book ever published on Judaism in the twentieth-century South. (Because Bauman also

edits the journal that thus disseminates such praise, he may be forced to be embarrassed in public, an act that, according to the Babylonian Talmud *Baba Metsia* 59a, deprives the perpetrator of a place in the world to come. Such are the risks that a reviewer must occasionally run.)

An anthology like *The Quiet Voices* also presents an historical test case of the Pittsburgh Platform (1885), which the Reform movement had enunciated to confine the destiny of a people to ethical precepts and to a mission of social justice. Judaism was a way for its subscribers to make the world better through righteousness. The Pittsburgh Platform was rather well timed. It was formulated on the cusp of the ugliest injustice from which blacks were suffering since their emancipation. Soon they would face systematic terror, persecution, and hostility. As the promises of the Fourteenth Amendment and the Fifteenth Amendment were scuttled, the law segregated and degraded the freed men and women, especially in the South. There, by the end of the nineteenth century, about three blacks a week were lynched and subjected to revolting sadism. Those who escaped the mobs endured poverty, misery, and hopelessness, which flight to the North or the West did little to alleviate. The movement that hammered out the Pittsburgh Platform, it is safe to conjecture, did not consider the urgency of smashing white supremacy. But in the succeeding decades, the Reform rabbis who served in the South could not elide the discrepancy between the cruelties inflicted on their black neighbors and the ideals of social justice that Reform Judaism taught.

How that disjunction was confronted (or evaded) is the subject of *The Quiet Voices*, which evokes the plight of such congregations and the rabbis who served them seven decades after the drafting of the Pittsburgh Platform. Sympathy should come easily. Fears were warranted, although there was in fact little pattern to the retribution that violent racists exacted. Some bombs went off where neither rabbis nor other Jewish leaders advocated civil rights. In Nashville one rabbi had denounced racial segregation. His synagogue, Janice Blumberg points out, was spared. The rabbi of another Nashville synagogue remained silent. His syna-

gogue was bombed. Nevertheless, the dilemma of these clergymen was awful. How might the safety of Jews be balanced against the right of their black Christian neighbors to be free from the oppression of their white Christian neighbors? How were the profits of merchants whose prosperity kept these synagogues alive to be weighed against the message of Prophets who had elevated Judaism itself? At a Union of American Hebrew Congregations convention in Birmingham in 1956, one Alabama rabbi bluntly opted for one side of this dilemma: "I wouldn't risk one hair on the head of one of my members for the life of every *shvartzeh* in this state."²⁰

The Quiet Voices focuses on other rabbis, and makes an emphatic claim on their behalf. There was "a far more widespread activism on the part of southern rabbis in the modern civil rights movement than has been acknowledged" (p. ix). Take Mississippi, where probably the most terrible pressure was applied, where white racism was most vivid, and where the capacity to resist it was most threatened. Yet Mantinband managed to serve Temple B'nai Israel in Hattiesburg for over eleven years (from 1951 until early 1963), while also serving on the board of the liberal Southern Regional Council, based in Atlanta. Synagogue board members urged him to curtail his habit of publicly condemning white supremacy. On one occasion, according to Clive Webb, "Mantinband listened quietly as he was told that he had no right to jeopardize the security of Hattiesburg's Jews by acting as he did. Then, smiling graciously, he replied that he would gladly comply with the board's demands. Asked when, he continued: 'The day I die'" (p. 223). Yet the rabbi was not fired, perhaps because Hattiesburg, consisting of fifty Jewish families, was probably not where graduates of the Hebrew Union College were most eager to live and work. Mantinband was nearly irreplaceable. He was nevertheless quick to accept the offer of a pulpit in Longview, Texas. Hattiesburg gave him a farewell banquet, at which the mayor presented Mantinband with the key to the city. Also paying tribute were business, civic, and academic leaders as well as other clergymen. But members of Temple B'nai Israel were absent.

Mantimband's closest ally was Nussbaum, an outsider raised in Toronto, a maverick who suspected that congeniality was overrated as a rabbinical virtue. Nussbaum preferred to counsel Freedom Riders and to criticize racial discrimination from his pulpit in Jackson. He tried to make Mississippi a less closed society, where he lived from 1954 until 1973. Only a hundred families belonged to Beth Israel, which, Gary Zola notes, was "one of the few religious buildings in the white community to house interracial gatherings." After the synagogue was bombed, the board of trustees prohibited such meetings without its prior approval. Nussbaum "bitterly resented" this "vote of no-confidence in his moral leadership" (p. 254). But he stuck it out until the worst was over.

South Carolina is not represented in this collection. Nor is Florida, though one rectification is Raymond A. Mohl's essay on the postwar fight for equality in Miami.²¹ Texas, on the other hand, gets two separate profiles, by Karl Preuss and by Hollace Ava Weiner. In San Antonio, Jacobson had an important ally (and friend) in the local archbishop, and met no vocal opposition from within Temple Beth-El in his adroit efforts to desegregate public facilities peacefully and without fanfare. Achieving integration, he once told Preuss, "wasn't a big deal" (p. 150). In Corpus Christi, less than one half of one percent of the populace was Jewish. No disparagement of Wolf's effective battles for desegregation is intended by noting that the black population was only five percent. Jacobson and Wolf lived among Texans who were less obsessed with race than were Deep Southerners. Visiting a tiny west Texas town that had voluntarily integrated early in the 1960s, a journalist expressed surprise. He was told, "We only had a couple colored families, and the kids went to a one-room school, and one of the boys weighed 210, did the 100 in 10.1, kicked fifty yards barefoot, so we integrated."²²

Another relatively benign locale was Durham and vicinity, the subject of Rogoff's meaty essay, which recounts not only the admirable efforts of rabbis but also of other Jewish residents to make race relations more egalitarian. His account manages to wriggle out of the trap of local history by making his cast of char-

acters genuinely interesting even to those who did not know them. Especially wrenching was the challenge that Grafman faced in Birmingham, the site of Martin Luther King's most important victory. Jews constituted less than one percent of the city's population, Klansmen over nine percent. Believing that King's mass demonstrations were denying a change in city government a chance to work, Grafman became one of the addressees of King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," which expressed keen disappointment with racial moderates among the local white clergy. Such criticism, Terry Barr argues, was unfair in the context of Grafman's six-decade-long career at Temple Emanu-El.

The demands on such rabbis would have been formidable even if they did not challenge racial injustice. The congregants to whom these rabbis ministered tended to be *amei-ha'arets*, not only ignorant of Judaism but ignorant of why learning is so integral to it. The limited cultural and social horizons that bounded small towns in an earlier era need not be belabored. Enlightened allies were not likely to be available. Above all the conservatism, timidity, and wariness of congregants, whose wellbeing depended on the good will of their gentile neighbors, imposed a huge, often insurmountable, barrier to rabbinical heroism. Under such circumstances what may be more noteworthy is not how few rabbis exhibited the sort of courage that shows up more often in history books than in history. What may impress the historian is that such rabbis operated in the South at all.

That they faced such crises of conscience testifies to the distinctiveness of the region. Nowhere else did their colleagues put themselves at such peril, or fear dynamiters and night riders who might with impunity demolish a synagogue. Unarmed segregationists might boycott the chief financial backers of the congregation itself and bankrupt such merchants. The civil rights era thus underscored how the South diverged from the rest of the republic. But how fully had the congregants of these rabbis internalized the way of life that permeated the region? Mark Bauman is dubious about claims that such Jews were southerners first, and, in a pamphlet that builds on a paper he delivered at the Southern Jewish Historical Society in Charleston in 1990, Bauman deftly

challenges the conventional wisdom. The South is distinguishable from the rest of America, he concedes; but he also argues that southern Jews themselves were pretty much like other American Jews. Living for nearly three centuries in the South, this minority was "influenced by the regional subculture in a relatively marginal fashion" (p. 5). Peripheral to "the myths of southern gentility, or of the Lost Cause" (p. 9), Jews tended to be merchants in an agrarian economy, businessmen among rustics who harbored suspicions of capitalism. If regional values exerted such an impact on Jews, Bauman asks, why then did blacks regard them as different from other whites and expect to "receive better treatment from them"? (p. 15). If the central themes of American Jewish history are adaptation to particular settings and the alteration of religion itself, then the South, he insists, is merely one of the regional variants, as are the Northeast and Far West too. Jews adapted smoothly to the South, and often became successful and prosperous. But so did Jews elsewhere. The "differences with the North were of minor degree rather than of substance" (p. 26).

Bauman is correct to assert that emphasis rather than absolute division should guide historians; what this debate is about is degree rather than kind. *The Southerner as American* elevates this interpretive conflict to a more sophisticated level (and also offers thick slabs of endnotes that provide in themselves a superb instruction in historiography). The likely resolution will take the following form: In some ways Jews of the South resembled gentile neighbors more than northern co-religionists. But it is not illogical to add that the Jews of the South were not mere facsimiles of southern gentiles; differences persisted, as Bauman rightly insists. Probably no aspect of Jewish life in the South has been unique, unknown elsewhere in the United States or, for that matter, in the Diaspora; and assimilation is as ancient as the worship of the Golden Calf, even as the moral law was being transmitted on Mount Sinai. But without the numbers or the will to form a vigorous and cohesive culture that could sustain itself except by later waves of immigration, southern Jews were especially susceptible to the regional pride and mores that, beginning in the nineteenth century, were so pervasive and intense.

Surely it matters to what sort of subculture Jews adapted and whether resistance might be detected. It is hard to imagine, for example, a counterpart elsewhere to Charles Bloch, an attorney who fervently championed states' rights and white supremacy. These principles he enlarged into a sort of ideology. Clive Webb, a British historian, has recently portrayed Bloch with wry even-handedness. In the conspicuous force of his convictions, in the intensity with which he propelled himself from the heritage of Isaiah and Amos, Bloch "saw himself as the Judah P. Benjamin of the New Confederacy," according to his liberal opponent in Georgia, attorney Morris B. Abram, a member of Atlanta's Temple. Bloch's strident participation in the massive resistance to desegregation was rare, indeed freakish, among southern Jews. But he merely pushed to extremes their own widespread acceptance of the racial mores of the region. His good twin was a wealthy Jewish businessman from Savannah, David Rabhan, who piloted gubernatorial candidate Jimmy Carter all over Georgia, facilitating the latter's victory in 1970. In gratitude the incumbent asked Rabhan what he wanted in return. "I want you to say in your inaugural address that the time to end racial discrimination in the South is upon us." The advisors to the moderate Carter were dubious; such a declaration would be "political suicide." But in 1971 Carter took the plunge and announced in Atlanta: "The time for racial discrimination is over." That inaugural address made him nationally famous, as the best representative of the New South.²³ Bloch made himself into the compleat southerner; Rabhan made himself an agent of subversion. Neither was perfectly representative of southern Jewry. But the careers of both testified to the enduring effect of race in the mind of the South.

Vocational patterns reflected American Jewish history more than they mirrored the southern economy. Southern Jews were less likely to be planters or farmers or laborers or soldiers. White gentiles were too bellicose to honor Isaiah's plea to "beat . . . swords into plowshares and . . . spears into pruning-hooks," but Jews preferred to plow their shares of businesses into investments. In many a hamlet, these wanderers settled down to operate "the Jew store," the title of Stella Suberman's memoir (with fic-

tional elements embedded in it). Aaron Bronson, the immigrant father of the narrator, heads the only Jewish family in "Concordia," Tennessee. There he has established residence, but it wasn't completely his home. "Having in Russia been tormented, chased and attacked by Cossacks, having in New York been insulted and ignored, whatever maltreatment he had endured in Concordia was minor league." So parochial and conformist a village could not be satisfying, and he refused to sentimentalize it. But he discovered that Klansmen were bluffing when they menaced him, and even they realized that for Concordia "a Jew store" was "a good thing" (pp. 286-287).

Suberman's book will not make readers reach for comparisons with Flaubert. But it offers a slice of social history and shows how pivotal enterprise was to such a family. In such a town, in such a store, the Bronsons put their hopes and their faith in fair treatment. ("The Jew store" does eventually go under, thanks to the Great Depression.) Bronson's Low-Priced Store adopts an ambiguous policy toward black customers, who were not allowed to try on clothing before deciding to make a purchase. That was the custom. But unlike other merchants, Bronson was willing to accept returns, and "would at least meet a Negro customer at the back door and arrange there for a return or exchange" (p. 63). Though hardly uncritical, Suberman's memoir collides with the withering description in *Meridian* (1976) of the owners of a Mississippi delicatessen, "making money hand over fist because they could think of nothing more exciting to do with their lives," Alice Walker wrote. "Making money to send their Elaines and Davids to law and medical school, without a word of official Hebrew, except when they visited in synagogues in the North where they also felt like strangers."²⁴

The intense religiosity of the region is also distinctive and has proved to be a mixed blessing. Eli Evans remembers joining his father, who served six terms as mayor of Durham, at an official welcome for an evangelist under the big tent. The preacher introduced him as follows: "Mayor Evans is here to greet us. Now, ya'll listen to the Mayor 'cause he's the same religion as our Savior." Jacksonville's Rabbi Greenstein observed that southern

fundamentalists “have a curiosity and respect for the Jews as God’s chosen people. We are intriguing to them because of our place in the Old Testament,”²⁵ in a section that has been so God-intoxicated that the bumper stickers asking other motorists to “Honk If You Love Jesus” are as familiar as the gun racks mounted on pick-up trucks.

Perhaps it helped that Judaism and Christianity have been so historically intertwined. Here Jews had an advantage denied to practitioners of other minority faiths in the most completely Protestant part of the Western Hemisphere. In 1997, when South Carolina’s board of education considered a requirement to post the Ten Commandments in public schools, an objection was raised in behalf of religious dissidents, to which one irate member, Henry Jordan, exclaimed, “Screw the Buddhists and kill the Muslims! And put that in the minutes!” Explaining that his goal was “to promote Christianity as the only true religion,”²⁶ he personified a stance that distinguished itself primarily for its candor and its ferocity, in a homogeneous region where noticeable differences in worship might be disturbing. Because Jews have continued to disagree with their neighbors about the Resurrection, an equivocal status is probably the best that can be achieved if the verities of Christianity are taken seriously.

Making sense of that status should continue to challenge historians, and it is a pleasure to report that most of the works under review have gallantly helped to clarify the southern Jewish experience. These authors have not given, nor can they give, the last word on a subject that cannot be securely confined to the past. They seem to have grasped the mixed message conveyed in the sensible injunction of the *Pirkei Avot* (2.21). “It is not thy duty to complete the work,” Rabbi Tarfon proclaimed, “but neither art thou free to desist from it.”

- ¹ Eli N. Evans, *The Provincials: A Personal History of Jews in the South* (New York, 1997).
- ² William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York, 1972), 174.
- ³ Evans, *Provincials*, xvi.
- ⁴ Melvin I. Urofsky, *Commonwealth and Community: The Jewish Experience in Virginia* (Richmond, 1997), viii.
- ⁵ Quoted in Maya Bell, "Historical 'Mosaic,'" *Chicago Tribune*, March 13, 1994.
- ⁶ Ludwig Lewisohn, *Up Stream: An American Chronicle* (New York, 1922), 103, 122; Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York, 1986), 195–207.
- ⁷ Julian B. Feibelman, *A Social and Economic Study of the New Orleans Jewish Community* (Philadelphia, 1941), 133; Lawrence N. Powell, *Troubled Memory: Anne Levy, the Holocaust and David Duke's Louisiana* (Chapel Hill, 2000), 367; Lillian Hellman, *Scoundrel Time* (Boston, 1976), 93.
- ⁸ William Faulkner, *Sanctuary* (New York, 1958), 258.
- ⁹ Quoted in Susan E. Tifft and Alex S. Jones, *The Trust: The Private and Powerful Family Behind The New York Times* (Boston, 1999), 25.
- ¹⁰ Malcolm Stern, "Uncles, Goats, and Family Trees," *Reform Judaism* 11 (Fall 1982): 44.
- ¹¹ Interview with Georgia Rosen, February 26, 1989, in Catherine Anne Wilkinson, "To Live and Die in Dixie: German Reform Jews in the Southern United States" (senior thesis, Princeton University, 1990), 37, 58.
- ¹² Interviews with Mark Jacobs, March 14, 1989, with Caroline Safer, March 13, 1989, and with Betsy Klein, January 4, 1990, in *ibid.*, 51–52, 57, 95–96, 99.
- ¹³ Interview with Leonard Glantz, in *ibid.*, 1, 106, 108.
- ¹⁴ Sandee Brawarsky, "Sons of the South," *Hadassah Magazine*, 80 (October 1998): 19, 21; Dan Hulbert, "Uhry Brings Back 'Ballyhoo,'" *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, August 11, 1996, L8.
- ¹⁵ Quoted in Thane Rosenbaum, "Southern Discomfort," *Forward*, February 28, 1997, 9, 10; Brawarsky, "Sons of the South," 21; Alex Witchel, "Remembering Prejudice, of a Different Sort," *New York Times*, February 23, 1997, II, 5, 27.
- ¹⁶ Janice Rothschild Blumberg, *One Voice: Rabbi Jacob M. Rothschild and the Troubled South* (Macon, GA, 1985), 79–110.
- ¹⁷ Alfred Uhry, *Driving Miss Daisy* (New York, 1987), 30; Blumberg, *One Voice*, 68–69.
- ¹⁸ Quoted in Blumberg, *One Voice*, 76–77; Steven Hertzberg, *Strangers Within the Gate City: The Jews of Atlanta, 1845–1915* (Philadelphia, 1978), 221.
- ¹⁹ Quoted in Jack Nelson, *Terror in the Night: The Klan's Campaign Against the Jews* (New York, 1993), 58.
- ²⁰ Blumberg, *One Voice*, 68.
- ²¹ Raymond A. Mohl, "'South of the South?': Jews, Blacks, and the Civil Rights Movement in Miami, 1945–1960," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 18 (Winter 1999): 3–36.
- ²² Quoted in Willie Morris, *North Toward Home* (Boston, 1967), 246.
- ²³ Clive Webb, "Charles Bloch, Jewish White Supremacist," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 83 (Summer 1999): 267–292; Morris B. Abram, *The Day is Short: An Autobiography* (New York, 1982), 94; Douglas Brinkley, "What It Takes," *New Yorker*, 72 (October 21–28, 1996): 78.
- ²⁴ Alice Walker, *Meridian* (New York, 1986), 180.
- ²⁵ Evans, *Provincials*, 137–138; Interview with Howard R. Greenstein, March 12, 1989, in Wilkinson, "To Live and Die in Dixie," 43.
- ²⁶ Quoted in Joan Delfattore, "Politicizing the Commandments," *American Jewish Congress Monthly* 67 (July/August 2000): 14.